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	H-00	TEDE-00	INR-00	IO-00	LAB-01	L-00	MOFM-00
	MOF-00	VCIE-00	NSAE-00	OIC-00	OIG-00	OMB-00	NIMA-00
	EPAU-00	PA-00	PER-00	SSO-00	SS-00	EVR-00	NCTC-00
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 INFO ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS - EMERY AND S/GPI

E.O. 12958: N/A
 TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [EINV](#) [BEXP](#) [BTIO](#) [OEXC](#) [OIIP](#) [SCUL](#)
 SMIG, LA
 SUBJECT: LAOS REACHES OUT TO "DIASPORA"

REF: STATE 78535

Summary

¶1. The GOL estimates one million Lao live overseas, mostly in the U.S., France, Australia, Japan, Germany, and Belgium. In the U.S., Lao-Hmong and Lowland Lao make up the majority of the Diaspora. Although in the past the GOL made little attempt to engage with its Diaspora, the GOL now actively seeks opportunities to work with its overseas compatriots for cultural and economic reasons. The GOL formed an association with Lao Diaspora in France and looks to do the same in the U.S. The GOL also is drafting a new decree to offer "honorary citizenship" to former Lao citizens to facilitate investment by this community. END SUMMARY.

Background

¶2. An estimated 350,000 Lao fled the country as refugees following the 1975 victory by the communist Pathet Lao over the Royal Lao Government. The U.S., France, and Australia received large numbers of the refugees (along with Germany, Japan, and Belgium), other refugees soon followed the original outflow, and a number of Lao people have since emigrated to join relatives in these countries. The GOL estimates one million Lao reside overseas.

¶3. Two groups make up the majority of the Lao in the U.S., the Lao-Hmong and the Lowland Lao. Although both groups of refugees opposed a communist takeover of Laos, ethnic differences between the groups and separate political agendas inhibit clear identification as a single socio-cultural group in the U.S. Both groups are active politically at the national and local level in the U.S. and try to influence USG policy toward Laos. The Lao-Hmong tend to focus more on Lao-Hmong specific issues, such as the Lao-Hmong migrants in Thailand, the few remaining Lao-Hmong opposing the GOL, and the treatment of ethnic minorities in Laos.

Overseas Activities

¶4. Because of the vocal (and sometimes vociferous) opposition to the GOL among Lao refugees in the U.S. and strained relations with the U.S., the GOL did not engage with that community for many years after 1975. However, as more Lao made return visits to Laos and relations with the U.S. improved, the GOL found value in reengaging with the overseas Lao for political, economic, and social reasons.

¶5. The GOL has established a program to work with overseas Lao to

promote Lao culture and to encourage overseas Lao to return to Laos and establish business enterprises. The GOL recently located the Lao Outreach Department (LOD) in the MFA, removing it from the Commission for External Relations, Central Committee, Lao People's Revolutionary Party. Phonekham Inthaboualy, Director General of LOD, told us some of the younger overseas Lao, especially those born outside of Laos, have weak Lao language skills. In addition to improving the language skills of the younger generation, the GOL also wants to work with the overseas Lao to promote Lao cultural awareness within the host country's population.

¶6. The MFA, through its Embassy in Paris, worked with Lao in France to create an official association that hosts social and cultural events, as well as allowing Lao officials to brief them on developments inside Laos. The GOL would like to form a similar association in the U.S. to learn from the Lao people in the U.S. what life is like for them and to help preserve their cultural values.

Closer to Home

¶7. In order to attract investment from overseas Lao, the GOL is drafting a new decree that would award "honorary citizenship" to former Lao citizens who have since naturalized in other countries. The new status as currently conceived would allow the recipients to hold a Lao passport, reside in Laos, and own property in Laos. The honorary citizens, however, could not participate in political activities.

Comment

¶8. The GOL's outreach to the overseas Lao has a pragmatic, economic element and a deeper, cultural aspect. The GOL is well aware of the role of the overseas Vietnamese in aiding Vietnam's rapid economic development. Even if the few return to invest, remittances can help its balance of payments and provide for some economic growth. Western Union's billboards in Vientiane tout the happiness that comes from "uncle's" money transfers to Lao children.

¶9. On a socio-cultural level, the GOL worries about the increasing foreign influences on Lao youth. Western and, especially, Thai cultural influences pervade much of urban Laos. Promoting a sense of "Laoness" among the diaspora can help the GOL define what it means to be Lao within a worldwide setting and contribute to a more cosmopolitan outlook -- needed as Laos projects itself more into the world community -- while maintaining its unique cultural identity.

Huso